

Flying over the Fens:

notes for a talk to the Flying farmers Association at March, 4th July 2017, by Mike Petty

I saw the fens from above once. That was 20 years ago when I took a balloon ascent as my leaving present for departing the Cambridgeshire Collection – I thought it would remind me of all those management meetings. We took off from my village recreation ground and came down in a field near Chatteris.

On route we were buzzed by what may have been a flying farmer. I was relieved he was watching where he was going, not struggling to navigate in a landscape that is constantly changing: not just new towns, windmills or reservoirs but entire river systems were just not there when I started my career in the mid 1960s

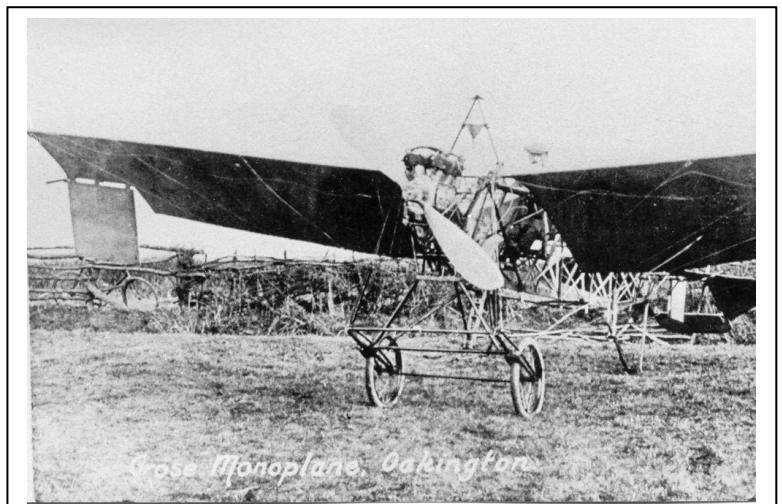
One of the First men to see the fens from above was Charles Green, one of the country's best-known balloonists. In Oct 1827 he lifted off from Cambridge ... "after three quarters of an hour I determined to commence our descent and alighted on a farm in Tick Fen, Chatteris. It being the only balloon of this nature ever to descend near this place men women and children set off at tremendous speed and even so far as Doddington some came running bear-headed". In a few minutes he was surrounded by a large concourse of almost breathless spectators ... the fair sex reluctant to retreat". No time was lost in packing up the balloon when Mr Green was escorted to Chatteris before departing for Cambridge in a chaise. That was 1827 - Chatteris had entered the aviation age three decades before the arrival of the steam train.

The man who brought aviation into the steam age was Edward P. Frost of West Wrating. In 1870 he built his first machine. A keen naturalist he based his design on the wings of birds, a creation of willow, feathers and silk described as 'a wonderful piece of work'. This was before the days of the internal combustion engine and they planned that the machine would be driven by a specially-built steam engine with a vertical boiler. But the engine did not develop the required power and although the wings flapped up and down it could not lift the heavy craft into the air. The machine was left under the trees in the park and by the time a petrol engine was available, 30 years later, the weather had left it a wreck.

But Frost kept one of the wings in his house and would invite people to sit on a music stool and flap it up and down, finding themselves being whirled around the room. Many of the outstanding pioneers in aviation, with famous names like Handley Page, Inglis, Maxim and Hargrave, visited the Hall or were associated with Frost. As a tribute to his foresight he was made President of the Aeronautical Society in 1909 when the Wright Brothers were awarded the Society's Gold Medal for their historic exploit.

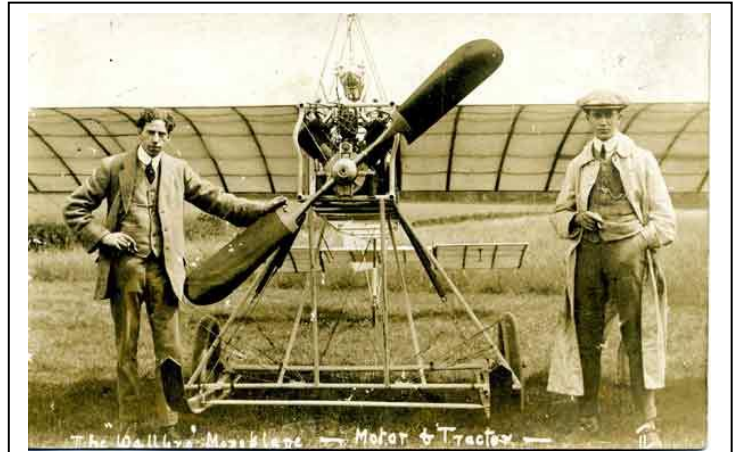
By then Cambridgeshire men were (almost) taking to the air

In 1909 in a barn at Oakington Messrs Grose and Feary were working on a cigar-shaped machine – an all-British monoplane with an air-cooled engine that would carry a passenger as well as the pilot. As the day of the first flight neared there was a heated debate between the two designers as to who should not be the pilot – one claimed he had a family, the other that he had a widowed mother to support. Eventually they resolved the issue and the plane careered across a



field; but it did not become airborne, except when it struck a bump

In 1910 inspired by the Oakington aeroplane four young scientific instrument makers named Wallis, Knightley, Booth and Miller, all living in Chesterton, decided to build a flying machine. For their workshops they hired a large barn in High Street, Chesterton. In the whole machine there not a single nail, but it is all fixed together with some 3,000 brass screws. It is throughout an all-British machine and the first and only biplane that has been made in Cambridge. Sadly things went wrong: during the course of a trial run in a field near Abington. They intended to test the pulling powers of the engine and not attempt a flight but the machine suddenly rose completely off the ground and sailed along at a height of three or four feet. She continued to fly like this for several yards and then the back part was seen to rise in the air and the front to sink towards the ground. Finding himself unable to right the machine Mr Wallis stopped the engine and sprang out. The monoplane slowly turned a complete somersault, eventually landing upside down and there lay with its wheels in the air like some giant insect on its back. The plane was exhibited at Mammoth Show, in a large marquee and the engine and tractor were set going at intervals attracting an enormous amount of interest but The Committee decided that a flight should not be attempted owing to possible risk to the public. The machine was destroyed in storm when hanger collapses



Meanwhile Out at Elm Mr F.C. Pruden was experimenting with a new cycloplane which he kept in a shed at Needham Hall, Elm. It ran on the lines of a bicycle or tricycle and if one pedalled hard enough it made it fly. The machine embodied some very novel ideas and great care was observed in keeping the thing secret. It was all but completed and a trial trip had been arranged but about midnight flames were seen bursting from the shed where the machine was stored along with a motor car. Both were completely destroyed. But was it what it seemed: he was charged with defrauding his Insurance Company .

But flying was taking on – or off

In December 1911 Cambridge newspapers reported how a fine aviation ground had been established on the site of the old racecourse at Huntingdon. Hangars will be placed on the meadow near the Great Northern Railway. Most aviators consider Port Holme to be the best aviation ground in England, easily accessible from London and the North. Several Cambridge people cycled to view the flying. They saw two machines in the air and watched William Rhodes Moorhouse make a beautiful spiral volplane (guide with the engine cut off), then give chase to some sea-gulls. The landing ground was practically flooded and when descending his machine entered the water, causing the tail to lift and turning it completely over. Down it went into the water with Mr Moorhouse in the well of the machine. Numbers rushed to help but before they arrived they saw the aviator come crawling out from under the plane. He seemed none the worse for his involuntary cold plunge .

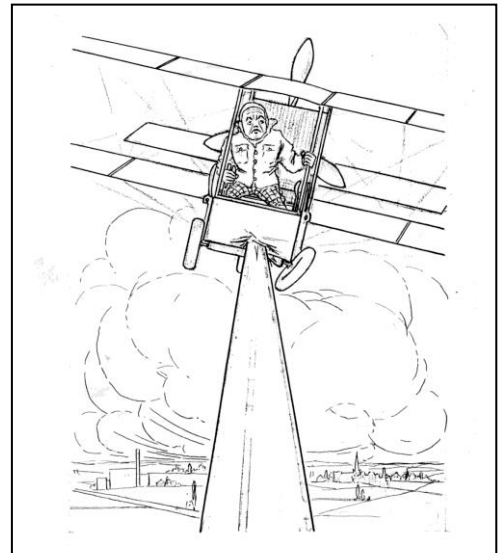
That October 1911 Moorhouse had left from Brooklands, became lost & tacked on to what he thought was GN railway; in fact was the LNW to Cambridge; running short of petrol & surrounded by houses he recognised Parkers Piece & came down with a dry tank at 5.40, parking near the University Arms. The machine was covered up & left for the night; he took off 6.30 next morning to Huntingdon Later he paid a second ‘flying visit’ to Cambridge landing on Midsummer Common. Several improvements had been

made in the monoplane since his last visit including a bottle labelled 'Cherry Brandy' fixed inside the 'conning tower' fitted up with a flexible tube with a mouthpiece so that he could take a 'nip' when so disposed. He is an intrepid young man of whom more will doubtless be heard in the future – later he became the first airman to be awarded the VC

His achievements are less remembered than those of one of his companions, Second Lieutenant K Wastell who was killed when his plane struck the steeple of St Ives church – the nearby pub commemorates the event

Littleport folk were early enthusiasts for flying.

In 1911 a great many were attracted to Littleport show by the announcement that an aeroplane flight would be attempted and they were not disappointed. The machine – one of the Bleriot type belonging to the Midland Aviation Syndicate – was exhibited in a tent until five o'clock when it was wheeled out. A force of police kept the crowd under control. A large field was selected for the start. The fen men, who had never seen an aeroplane before, described it as 'like a self-binder'. There was a large cheer when the aviator took his seat and started the engine. In the first attempt the machine travelled from one end of the field to the other at a height of about 15 feet. It then headed towards Lt Downham and rose beautifully while the crowd cheered. It had travelled some hundreds of yards when the aviator, for reasons best known to himself, descended in a field of corn. In order to facilitate a start for another ascent the aeroplane was taken to a clover patch. There was a considerable delay and the majority of the crowd had returned to the show ground when the machine was seen again to rise to 50 feet but then the aviator planed down to earth again. It did not descend so well as on previous occasions and it was reported that an accident had happened. A proportion of the propeller had broken off. This put an end to the flying and the crowd dispersed, satisfied that a flight had really been made.



Sadly in 1932 Littleport show was plunged into gloom when a man died after his parachute became entangled in the rudder of the plane. The machine at once tail dived and drifted backwards over an oatfield. The right-hand wing struck the ground and the propeller dug into the soil. His wristwatch was still going. Postcards were produced, showing the wreckage

Flying was not for the old: Sir Charles Rose, the Liberal MP for East Cambs, died with

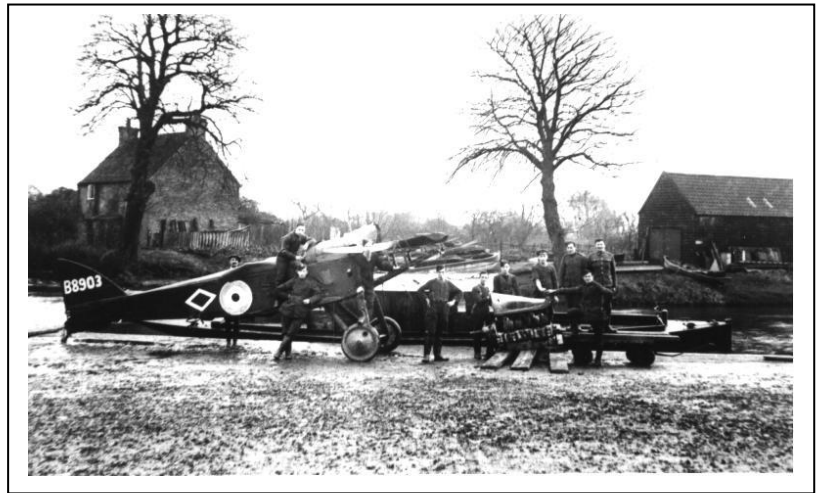
tragic suddenness in his motor car as he was returning from Hendon Aerodrome where he had taken a flight in a biplane. It had circled at a moderate height for seven minutes and on landing he said he had enjoyed the trip. The Coroner ruled in April 1913 that the excitement and exhaustion of the new experience had brought on a heart failure. An aeroplane was not suitable for those getting on in years. Aeroplaning should be left to the young, vigorous and robust. Sir Charles might have survived many years had he lived a placid and quiet existence.

Flying made great developments over the battlefields of Cambridgeshire following the landing of an enemy army on the coast of Norfolk in 1912 and the mobilisation of a force to repel them. Both had

cavalry, both had cyclists, both had balloons – and both had planes – although the fight was just a (massive) military manoeuvre for flying was for real, one of the heroes of the air being an American, Colonel Samuel Franklin Cody, a former cowboy and gold prospector

By the time war came for real planes became quite common - one came down between Bedford Rivers when had to be brought back to Ely by Appleyard's boat – which thus became the first fenland Aircraft Carrier. And during WWI Zeppelins used the main railway line from Lynn to London as a means of navigation – but military aviation is outside the scope

Post-war flying became popular. Prof B.M. Jones told a meeting in March 1926: “I look forward to seeing in my lifetime a state in which flying is as safe, and has the same order of expense as railway travel, carried out at an average speed of 200 miles per hour, night and day”.



Planes could go wrong. The R.A.C. has decided to extend the benefits of its ‘Get You Home’ service to members of the Club whilst flying. It has hitherto provided a relief car free of charge for their members who have broken down on the road but a considerable number are now either owners of light aeroplanes or are members of flying clubs. Should any of them whilst flying be compelled to make a forced landing they will be able to send for an R.A.C. relief car and be conveyed to the nearest railway station. If the plane is of the folding wing type that can be towed on a public road the R.A.C. is prepared to pay for its conveyance to any town within the limits of the scheme, the paper reported in November 1929

In September 1934 Sir Alan Cobban brought his flying circus to Ely. There were displays of aerobatics, a lady glider and a parachute descent. The most popular machine was the multi-engined Handley Page ‘Youth of New Zealand’ in which passengers, seated in comfortable chairs in a roomy saloon enjoyed the experience of soaring over the Cathedral. 34 09 13.

But by then Ely had its own aviation hero: that July he first air display by the recently-formed Ely Aero Club attracted 2,000 people to their flying field on the Downham Road. Mr H.R. Dimock was the first Ely citizen to own a private plane and his activities in the air had been watched with interest. The club hoped to have its own ground, own staff and own machines. Mr H.R. Dimock had a lucky escape from serious injury when his machine crashed at Cardiff Airport. He had been demonstrating a Super Drone machine in which the pilot sits at the front, the propeller being above and behind his head. Mr Dimock's hat flew off and caught in the propeller, which snapped. Luckily he was flying fairly low and was able to bring the machine down with only a minor crash. His injuries were very slight

The eyes of the world turned to Mildenhall in 1934 for the England to Melbourne air race. Then in 1935 the largest number of British warplanes ever assembled in one spot have arrived at RAF Mildenhall for the Silver Jubilee review where they were inspected by the King. Three hundred and fifty in number, they ranged from tiny 230 mph Gauntlets to the Overstrand giant bombers with power-driven machine guns mounted in the turret

Flying was expensive, but there were cheaper ways to get into the skies. In 1935 a crowd of 2,000 people invaded Marshall's Aerodrome to see a demonstration by M. Henry Mignet of his marvellous little machine, 'The Flying Flea'. Thousands of people would love to fly but could not afford an ordinary plane so he had built 'The Flea' which was a combination of kite and parachute. It cost £70 to build and can do 40 miles per gallon. He took it up to 1,000 feet and then cut the engine. The little machine floated gently to earth like a parachute and made a perfect landing. Next year a 'Flying Flea' airplane was built by Mr W.V. Smedley of Wisbech in 1936 and tested in Cambridge. But when the test pilot was killed elsewhere, the machine was abandoned

But you could hire one – from Ely: Ely Aero Club (Humphrey Roger Dimmock, proprietor) let out planes for private hire but not commercial purposes. They'd received a telegram from a man in Coventry asking to hire a machine for a day. He'd been offered a Hawk for £5. But as the certificate of Air Worthiness was at the Air Ministry the man refused to hire it, saying he was not satisfied with the condition of machine. He told a court in January 1938 how he'd flown to Ely, having to land at a village because he could not find the airfield, and claimed expenses for the journey and hire of another plane

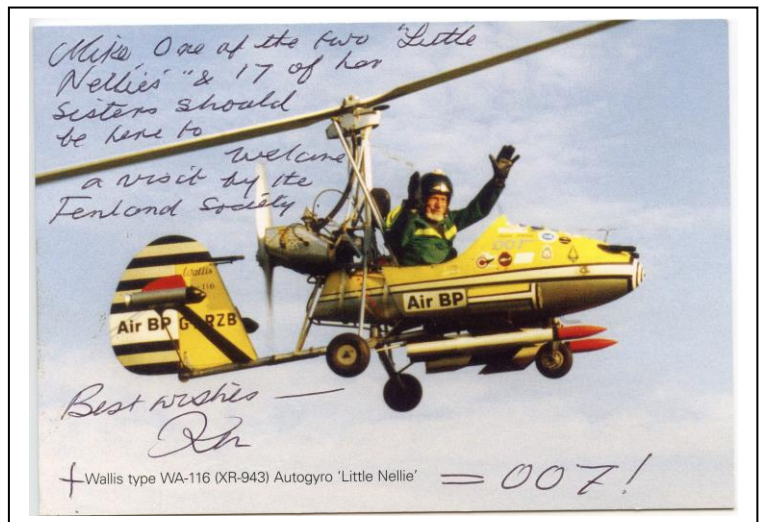
WWII saw flying become even more dangerous – too much of a story for tonight ... and disaster was always only a propeller away: in August 1951 a plane crashed in St Mary's Street Ely. Olive Silcock recalled: "I remember it was sometime before 9am. ... a large bang, which made No. 3 St. Mary's Street (my house) tremble. "Some of the wreckage fell outside our front door. A pram outside Joe Brand's shop was crushed and the King's Arms (opposite) had their pub windows and door damaged. People came from nowhere, but I was told not to leave the house because of the fuel that was everywhere, running down the street. The road was blocked off and RAF servicemen were on guard. It was a day to remember.

It could not put off one Ely lad who'd risen to rank of Wing Commander, even though he had only one good eye. His name was Ken Wallis a member of the well-known Ely family. It had been his dad who'd built that machine in Cambridge in 1910 – the one that never flew. Ken reconstructed it, using newspaper reports for crucial details – and proved that his father had indeed been on the brink of flying fame.



And Ken built his own: the gyrocopter. In 1957 he imported a Benson autogyro which he modified. The result is a practical single seat machine known as the Beagle-Wallis WA-116. It would leap into the air in about 25 yards and climb very steeply at over 1,000 feet per minute before landing n half the length of a tennis court. It was this plane, flown by Ken which achieved fame as 'Litle Nellie' in a James Bond film – but more importantly was used for a variety of specialist uses. With it he held several world records

Two of these he established in the fens. Following a measured course along the 16ft drain at Chatteris he attained a speed of 117.8 mph – beating the previous record held by an American by almost 10 mph. In May 1985 he notched up his 16th world record. Flying from Waterbeach, Ken completed his remarkable record-breaking flight to mark the 75th anniversary of the first public viewing of a monoplane built in Cambridge by his father and uncle. “It seemed that the anniversary should be marked in some way, so I made an attempt upon the one work record not held by my autogyro aircraft”, he said.



By 1982 the new flying craze, sport and business of microlights had arrived in Cambridgeshire. Taurus Aviation had been set up at Haddenham and with the co-operation of farmers they now had a choice of fields from which they could take off and land.

So what of Flying Farmers – your arrival was anticipated in November 1948:

Days of the “flying farmer” were foreshadowed at the Cambridge cattle market when a Tiger Moth dual-control aircraft was auctioned along with the more usual agricultural implements. It was bought for £100 by Mr Jack Branch, of Waterbeach, an agricultural contractor and motor dealer. The machine, once an RAF aircraft was advertised in the catalogue as “engine as new, airframe done 1,508 hours at the last inspection”. It is the first time that an aircraft has been auctioned at the cattle market. Interested spectators climbed on to the lorry on which it rested to inspect it, while small boys took the opportunity of climbing into the cockpit. A civil aviation expert estimated that a similar aircraft in going order would be priced about £250.

When I mentioned to March Civic Society a couple of weeks ago that the Flying Farmers were coming to their town they were delighted. But I am not really sure they believed me

They might be remembering what had happened in September 1911: a man drove into March in a powerful racing car and announced that Grahame-White, the famous airman would fly into the town that evening. A large crowd gathered in a field selected for the landing and scores of cameras were placed in position. But nobody came - the whole thing was a hoax.

Today you have made that truly happen – seldom can so many distinguished aviators have gathered together in one room in this fine town – just watch out for that ‘large concourse of almost breathless spectators ... the fair sex reluctant to retreat’ as you fly off

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